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ABSTRACT

Noting that all Americans are stakeholders in the quest to prevent violence in the critical early years, this Digest focuses on preventing violence in children's lives and suggests ways caregivers, parents, and teachers can reduce the damaging effects of violence. Even before a child is born, violence can have a profound effect upon its life. Studies show that battered pregnant women often deliver low birth-weight babies who are at risk for exhibiting developmental problems. Shaken baby syndrome, the shaking of an infant or child, can be devastating and result in irreversible brain damage, blindness, and even death. Violent children usually come from violent homes, where parents model violence as a means of resolving conflict and handling stress. Even if children are not abused physically themselves, they can suffer psychological trauma, including lack of bonding, from witnessing battering. Research also shows that chronic exposure to violence adversely affects a child's ability to learn. The relationship between violence and learning is significant because cognitive skills are crucial in terms of academic success, self-esteem, coping skills, and overall resilience. Parents, teachers, and other caregivers can practice specific steps to prevent violent behavior, including the following: (1) give children consistent love and attention; (2) ensure that children are supervised and guided; (3) model appropriate behaviors; (4) do not hit children; and (5) be consistent with rules and discipline. Directors of preschools and child care centers have an opportunity to address violence prevention in early childhood. Violence prevention methods that can make a difference in the lives of parents and young children include the following: (1) offer parenting classes that deal with effective parenting and child development; (2) conduct training for parents, expectant parents, and those who work directly with young children; and (3) provide educational opportunities concerning the prevention of shaken baby syndrome. (LPP)

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Early Childhood Violence Prevention

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Consider these grim statistics regarding American children: every day, 10 are murdered, 16 die from guns, 316 are arrested for crimes of violence, and 8,042 are reported abused or neglected (Children's Defense Fund, 1997, p. 15). In 1996, more than 3 million children were reported as victims of child abuse and neglect to child protective agencies in the United States (National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse [NCPCA], 1998). Wang and Daro estimate that more than 3 children die each day as a result of child abuse or neglect. Of these children, approximately 78% are under 5 years old at the time of their death, while 38% are under 1 year of age (cited in NCPCA, 1998). Violence is now perceived as a public health issue, and there is much evidence to illuminate its deleterious effects.

Among the current prevention and intervention efforts are Healthy People 2000, which identifies violence prevention as a national health priority; the National Education Goals, which call for safe and drug-free schools; and the American Academy of Pediatrics' Health Status Goals for 1997-1998, which call for a reduction in domestic, community, media, and entertainment violence (National Education Goals Panel, 1997; American Academy of Pediatrics, 1997).

This Digest focuses on preventing violence in children's lives and suggests ways caregivers, parents, and teachers can reduce the damaging effects of violence.

The Effects of Violence on Young Children

The Early Years. Even before a child is born, violence can have a profound effect upon its life. Studies show that battered pregnant women often deliver low birth-weight babies who are at great risk for exhibiting developmental problems (Prothrow-Stith & Quaday, 1995). Shaken Baby Syndrome, the shaking of an infant or child by the arms, legs, or shoulders, can be devastating and result in irreversible brain damage, blindness, cerebral palsy, hearing loss, spinal cord injury, seizures, learning disabilities, and even death (Poussaint & Linn, 1997). The growing body of knowledge regarding early brain development suggests that "the ways parents, families, and other caregivers relate and respond to their young children, and the ways that they mediate their children's contact with the environment, directly affect the formation of neural pathways" (Shore, 1997, p. 4).

Psychological Effects. Violent children usually come from violent homes, where parents model violence as a means of resolving conflict and handling stress (Page et al., 1992). Even if children are not abused physically themselves, they can suffer psychological trauma, including lack of bonding, from witnessing battering. As Lerner (1992) points out, attachment or bonding has far-reaching implications not only for the emotional well-being of a child, but also for a child's cognitive development and the child's ability to cope effectively with stress and to develop healthy relationships. Children who witness violence can display an array of emotional and behavioral disturbances, including low self-esteem, withdrawal, nightmares, self-blame, and aggression against peers, family members, and property (Peled, Jaffe, & Edleson, 1995).

Violence and Learning. Research also shows that chronic exposure to violence adversely affects a child's ability to learn (Shore, 1997; Prothrow-Stith & Quaday, 1995; Kurtz, Gaudin, & Wodarski, 1994; Lorion & Saltzman, 1993). Learning itself is an essential tool for violence prevention (Prothrow-Stith & Quaday, 1995). Children who achieve in school and develop important reading, critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills are better able to cope with stressful and perhaps dangerous situations. Also, academic achievement enhances the development of positive self-esteem and self-efficacy, both of which are necessary for children to experience emotional well-being and to achieve success. The relationship between violence and learning is particularly significant because cognitive skills are crucial in terms of academic success, self-esteem, coping skills, and overall resilience. As Prothrow-Stith and Quaday (1995) assert: "When our children's ability to learn is being dangerously undermined, the foundation of our society is being damaged in a manner that cannot be easily repaired" (p. 27). Interventions must begin early in order to help children develop higher-order thinking skills, empathy, impulse control, anger management, peaceful conflict resolution, and assertive communication.

What Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers Can Do

Children learn from what they see. To prevent violence, parents and teachers need to model appropriate behaviors in the way they manage problems, conflict, anger, and stress. Parents, teachers, and other caregivers can help children learn to deal with emotions without using violence. They also can practice specific steps to prevent violent behavior. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychological Association (1995) provide suggestions to help parents and other caregivers reduce violence:

- Give children consistent love and attention—every child needs a strong, loving relationship with a caring adult to feel safe and secure, and to develop a sense of trust.
- Ensure that children are supervised and guided—they learn important social skills by interacting with others in well-supervised activities. Unsupervised children often have behavioral problems that can lead to violence.
- Model appropriate behaviors—children learn by example. Discuss problems with them, and help them learn nonviolent solutions to conflict and problems.

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- Do not hit children—physical punishment sends the message that it is acceptable to hit others to solve problems. Nonphysical methods of discipline help children deal with their emotions and teach them peaceful ways to handle problems and conflicts.
- Be consistent with rules and discipline—children need structure for their behavior, including clearly stated, logical consequences for not following the rules.
- Make sure children do not have access to firearms—never store firearms (even if unloaded) in places where children have access to them. Teach children about the dangers of firearms and steps to take if they find a gun.
- Try to keep children from seeing too much violence in the media—limit television viewing time, and talk with children about the violence they see in movies, on TV, and in video games. Help them understand how painful violence is in real life and discuss its serious consequences.
- Teach children ways to avoid being victims of violent acts—stress personal safety, including what to do if anyone tries to hurt them and how to call 911.
- Take care of yourself and be connected with your community—stay involved with family, friends, and neighbors. Take pride in your community, and be proactive in helping to keep it safe.

Directors of preschools and child care centers have an opportunity to specifically address violence prevention in early childhood. There are numerous violence prevention methods that can make a difference in the lives of parents and young children. Here are some workable ideas:

- Offer parenting classes that deal with effective parenting and child development.
- Conduct training for parents, expectant parents, and those who work directly with young children. Life skills that can be addressed include specific violence prevention skills (e.g., empathy, gentle touch, anger management, impulse control, conflict resolution, and learning how to set and enforce limits); stress management and positive coping techniques; problem solving; and communication.
- Provide educational opportunities concerning the prevention of Shaken Baby Syndrome. Show parents and caregivers how to recognize their emotional "triggers" (when they feel they are about to lose control), and teach them anger management and coping techniques for self-control.
- Send home tip sheets or include tips in family newsletters that deal with topics related to violence prevention, including Shaken Baby Syndrome, stress management, and communication. A list of parenting resources and hotline numbers also can be included.
- Teach children at an early age that feelings are normal—even feelings of anger or hurt; however, violence is *not* an acceptable method for expressing anger, frustration, and other negative feelings.
- Be a vigilant, positive role model.

Conclusion

As Pransky (1991) explains, "Our behavior is shaped by conditions in our environment, particularly as we grow. This is the essential piece to the puzzle. The way our children are treated within their important environments will largely determine the shape they will be in and how they will behave" (p. 7). All Americans are stakeholders in the quest to prevent violence in the critical early years. All children deserve the opportunity to "fly" and reach their highest potential—we must not allow them to become "hidden casualties."

For More Information

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